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par Barry Plumb

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Strategy and Human Resource Management, 2nd edition,
by Peter Boxall and John Purcell, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008,
351 pp., ISBN 978-1-403992-10-9.

Whilst this is a review of the above mentioned text, readers should be aware that an earlier edition was published in 2003. Super diligent and enquiring minds can commence a comparison of the two editions (outside the scope of this review) by reference to the Introduction section commencing at viii.

Authors Boxall and Purcell open by declaring their mission in *Strategy and Human Resource Management* as being: "to explore the ways in which human resource management (HRM) is strategic to organizational success." This requires an examination of how HRM affects organizations' viability and performance. We are told by the authors that the book is not organized around the classical HRM functions of recruitment, pay, training, etc. but rather the focus is on the need for a critical overview of the importance of how management tackles HRM; hence part 1 is about connecting strategy and HRM, part 2 is on general principles for managing work and people and part 3 examines the management of people in dynamic and complex business contexts.

The outlined approach in each chapter is based on three elements: theory, research and illustration, thus enabling a commitment to analysis and research which is then tempered with the inclusion of case examples – which in addition to linking with theoretical propositions contributes to the retention of reader interest.

Significant themes of the book centre on human resource strategy being an essential element of business strategy and its criticality to the organization; that HRM goals are plural and prone to strategic tensions; managers adapt HR strategy to suit organizational context; lists of HR best practices can be unwise if imported and applied blindly but there

is a role for adopting underpinning principles in HRM; and HR strategy is usefully understood as a cluster of HR systems.

The book commences with definitional discussion of HRM and an example of small business expanding to take on employees, thus for the first time becoming involved in managing work and people and its attendant requirements. Importantly, the point is made that HRM can never be the sole province of human resources specialists and that line managers must be involved, with an inevitable variability of style and approach.

HRM is described as a set of activities aimed at building individual and organizational performance and a model is set out based on AMO, where (A) = individual ability, (M) motivation and (O) the opportunity to perform. It is noted that it is not only HRM that influences the AMO variables.

Reference is made to academic criticism of HRM studies being focused too much on the firm with insufficient attention paid to wider external environments. The authors accept this point and propose that HRM is profoundly affected by industry characteristics and societal differences. Additionally, the public sector is included in the dialogue, which ensures that a sometimes excluded segment of work activity is considered.

There is a useful discussion on the meaning of strategic HRM and cautions about equating strategy with strategic plan documents. We are reminded that many small firms do not have strategic plans but this does not mean the enterprise operates without a strategy. An interesting point is made that it is not useful to make a hard distinction between strategy and tactics

or operations because to do otherwise could lead to a conclusion that strategy is only driven from the top and tactics/operations are lower order mop up type activities. The discussion includes the notion that the strategic process involves key choices among stakeholder groups and that competitive and other forces impose a degree of constraint; the level of constraint integrated into the process is a result of the deliberations.

Human resource practitioners, amongst others, should be interested in the examination of integrating HR strategy with the wider business strategy, a laudable but sometimes unmet aim. In defining strategic HRM and human resource strategy, two delivery methods, best fit and best practice, are comprehensively reviewed. Frameworks for both methodologies are examined and references to theoretical studies and other analyses abound. There is a clear preference for the best fit approach based on the evidence of what firms actually do, although ways of accommodating elements of best practice theories are spelled out.

The authors scrutinize a branch of strategic management which emerged in the 1990's known as the resource based view (RBV) of the firm. RBV proponents are interested in ascertaining how a firm can build an exclusive form of fit. Studies of chief executive opinions are referred to and questions posed about capitalizing on the competitive advantage which might arise from clusters of employee strengths and capabilities. Necessarily, attention focuses on labour market forces, the management of knowledge and the risks arising when a key employee walks out the door. There is also reinforcement of the earlier expressed view that the focus should not solely be on the firm and that external forces and pressures must be considered.

On the next stage of our literary journey, a traverse of work organization

and employment practices unfolds and we are told about HIW's (high involvement work systems) and should there be any forgetfulness, we are reminded about Taylorism and Fordism. Whilst this section has emphasis on the manufacturing sector, there is some reference to work systems in the services and public sector. We are then lead to considering "employee voice", evolving as worker participation, employee involvement and industrial democracy. Attention is directed to HR strategy and the extent to which employees are central to the achievement of firm performance or are deemed peripheral. Linked to the strategic process, consistency of actions is vital and trust is critical, or conversely, a lack of trust will negatively affect firm performance and achievement.

In an exploration of human resource strategy and the dynamics of industry based competition, a position is put that the fundamental priority of HR strategy is to secure and maintain the kind of human resources that are necessary for the firm's viability. Cycles of industry stability and change are discussed and evolutionary phases looked at. There is a reminder that newcomer Apple reigned supreme over long established IBM for a period due to innovation but the competition used its resources to again assert itself. The authors open up some new considerations about relative lack of human resource based research on start up companies, with most literature focused on mature enterprises. Could this be explained by the lack of identity of struggling yet to flower businesses which invariably would lack capacity to accommodate such studies? Complexity of large corporations and their behaviour in mergers and acquisitions are mentioned in the book whilst ethical and legitimacy issues are also considered.

Does this book meet its stated objectives and fill a need in the literary world? The authors have taken us on a journey of examination of strategic

HRM with considerable gusto and research discipline. They have ordered the publication logically and utilized frequent illustrative techniques with models, tables and examples, all of which contribute to reader friendliness. There is less use of footnotes than in other texts, although academia might construe this in a critical way. In any objective summation, *Strategy and Human Resource Management* is

considered to be a more than useful addition to what is a fairly crowded field of literary endeavour and is commended to students and interested practitioners alike.

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La contractualisation de la relation de travail,

par Christian Bessy, Paris : LGDJ, 2007, 317 p., ISBN 978-2-275032-15-3.

La place du droit du travail dans l'économie capitaliste ainsi que l'encadrement des choix économiques par des dispositions de droit du travail ont souvent été questionnés tant chez les juristes que chez les économistes. Ce questionnement a pris tout son sens au début des années 1980 lorsque les bouleversements profonds de nos économies ont remis en cause les institutions en place. Certains économistes, critiques à l'égard de l'approche néo-classique, ont alors développé de nouveaux axes d'interprétation de ces phénomènes. C'est le cas de l'économie des conventions, dont est issu l'auteur de cet ouvrage, Christian Bessy, économiste du travail et spécialiste de l'analyse économique des institutions.

À partir de cette veine théorique exposée au chapitre 1, l'auteur examine les termes de la relation de travail d'aujourd'hui et cherche à expliquer le phénomène de contractualisation de cette relation. Il s'appuie dans cette démarche sur l'approche dite « interactive du droit », issue de la sociologie du droit, qui étudie l'activité sociale des acteurs orientée par les règles de droit. Ces règles, quels que soient leur source et leur caractère, seront mobilisées pour construire ou résoudre les situations sociales. Une telle approche conduit à observer l'utilisation routinière des

outils juridiques, en l'occurrence les contrats de travail, faite par les acteurs. Parmi eux, certains jouent un rôle crucial, les « intermédiaires du droit », soit des professionnels du droit. Ces derniers ont la maîtrise des règles, des processus et de leur interprétation par les cours de justice. Ils peuvent donc guider la rédaction des contrats en anticipant les litiges sans que les parties à la relation de travail en comprennent toujours les tenants et les aboutissants. La prise en compte de cette activité des « intermédiaires du droit » conduit à relativiser en partie le rôle du droit traditionnel, celui issu de l'activité des pouvoirs publics et des tribunaux de juridiction supérieure, et à mettre en évidence une activité normative intermédiaire. L'auteur entend ainsi utiliser cette perspective pour mieux comprendre l'usage « instrumental », les « stratégies de contournement » du droit. Il pose à cet égard l'hypothèse d'un recul des relations plus coopératives et d'un affaiblissement des cadres collectifs comme facteur explicatif.

Christian Bessy entreprend donc les analyses qualitative et quantitative de plus de 400 contrats de travail, répartis sur plusieurs décennies (1970 à 2004), en provenance de plus de 300 entreprises issues de différents secteurs économiques. Il examine ainsi l'évolution des pratiques contractuelles